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The Birth Control Controversy In The United Kingdom

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LONDON, ENGLAND

Seldom in the United Kingdom has the Catholic point of view on a medico-social problem been given such publicity in the national press as during the last few months. As would be expected, the problem is birth-control, but considering the Catholic population in this country which is below 5 million, it is of more than usual interest that our point of view should have been given such prominence. The background of the general interest in this subject is the result of the flood of literature on birth control, repeated references on radio and television, and the focusing of public attention on the minority group, i.e., Catholics and their objection to family planning by the generally recognized methods in this country.

Until quite recently the Catholic laity were prepared to accept the ruling of the Church on this question without going into the reasons too deeply. They were accepting the ruling as a matter of discipline, and some even as a matter of faith. For many years, in fact since 1948, I have suggested in articles and letters to the Catholic press, the importance of educating the Catholic community not only to know the teaching of the Church on birth control, but also to understand the reasons for the views we hold. I have stressed that Catholic social organizations and the clergy must inevitably be confronted with the question of planned parenthood. At that time

there was still a strong core of Catholic opinion which considered that the sole purpose of marital sex relationship was procreation. Later, in 1951, following Pope Pius XII' *Discussions on Moral Problems in Married Life*, planned parenthood, by means morally acceptable to the Church, became more recognized as a benefit to the family and society. There followed many books on the Catholic approach to the function of sex in marriage. In one of these books, *Love and Control*, by Cardinal L. J. Suenens, the author clearly brings into perspective the meaning of "primary" and "secondary" purposes of marital sex relationship, in the following passage:

In speaking of the primary purpose, the Church does not wish to consider the other purposes to be understood as secondary in the modern sense of the word. For us "secondary" signifies of lesser importance and it is not in that sense that the Church wishes to express herself. It must be that the Church wishes to express herself. It must be understood that in defining procreation and its necessary corollary, education of children, the Church means that such is the more specific end of conjugal life which unites two people of opposite sex. The other ends should respect this objective orientation inherent in all sex activity; whence comes their qualification as secondary or subordinate in this particular respect. "Primary end," therefore, signifies the more specific end; but all other specific purposes are united with it to form a whole of which the components are interdependent and inseparable.

The views of the Church on marital sex relationship have to some extent been clarified, yet a recent survey by Professor David Glass concludes that 45% of Catholics in the United Kingdom use means of planned parenthood contrary to the Church's moral teaching. As a gynaecologist frequently confronted with this problem, I would state that this figure is very conservative. How then has this position arisen? In my opinion two reasons are responsible: (1) Some consider the moral objections to contraceptives open to question, or if these objections are accepted, they have no confidence in the alternative method—the "safe period." (2) Given the moral objections to contraceptives as accepted, they are not considered to be applicable to the "pill."

To add to the confusion of thought, varied opinions have been expressed, from time to time, on the moral issues governing the use of the "pill"—and the condemnation of its use is by no means as clear as was first thought. Any condemnation of a method of planned parenthood on moral grounds depends on whether or not its use violates the Natural Law. Here again a further difficulty arises. What is the Natural Law and how does it apply to the function of sex? Is it inflexible? Could it be that God's overall plan is that in the evolution of time man should understand more fully the purpose and limitations of his creative power and act accordingly?

In the last few weeks the spotlight of publicity has been centered on birth control as a result of an interview given by Archbishop Roberts, S. J. to a Catholic periodical. I quote an extract:

If I were not a Catholic, I would accept the position taken by the Lambeth Conference, namely that there are cases where conscientious thought by the parties concerned would entitle people to practice contraception. How you can

destroy the position by reason alone is not clear to me. . . .

He concludes by saying:

Those of us who can't see why or how to convict of crime the millions who see contraception as a right or duty within marriage—certainly may and must press for the acceptance by the General Council of the challenge to justify by reason our own challenge to the world made in the name of reason.

Since this interview, Archbishop Roberts is reported as having said that a statement should be made at the next Vatican Council for the benefit of non-Catholics as well as Catholics because the Church now "challenged the whole world."

The position in the United Kingdom has been further complicated by the Archbishop of Westminster's official statement by which he condemns unequivocally, not only the usual methods of contraception, but also the use of the "pill" as a means of planned parenthood.

It has been acknowledged for some time that the "pill" has great therapeutic possibilities and modifications of its contents have overcome to a large extent the minor disturbances resulting from its use. There may even come a time when the "pill" may no longer postpone ovulation, but merely enable a woman to foretell the exact day of ovulation. If and when this new development takes place, would the present objections to its use be valid?

As a result of all this discussion, the general trend of Catholic thinking in the United Kingdom may be summarized as follows: (1) What evidence is there in the Old and New Testaments for the Church's teaching against the generally accepted forms of planned parenthood? (2) Given our present interpretation of Natural Law, will there ever be a method of planned parenthood acceptable morally, which is practical? (3) If the Church is to

continue exercising world-wide influence on family life—will this be possible if the present rigid interpretation of the Natural Law is maintained?

What is the Catholic doctor's position in this complex situation? There is no doubt that many consider that the use of the "safe period" from a medical point of view has very definite limitations. The position has not been helped by the publication of a number of books which place the onus of interpreting the fertile and infertile phases on the mother. For some this may be possible, but for the majority it is not a practical method of approach. In my opinion, at least 15% of women are quite unsuitable subjects for the use of this method, even under medical direction.

Furthermore, there is the very debatable issue as to whether the Catholic doctor should advise non-Catholic patients on contraceptive methods. This issue is of great importance in this country as more than 90% of parents consider that forms of birth control other than the "safe period" are mor-

ally permissible and medically more reliable. Again, as the proportion of mixed marriages is as high as 25%, the doctor may find that he is advising one partner on a method of planned parenthood which is not acceptable to the other.

In more general terms, the background of the present controversy in the United Kingdom may be illustrated by an extract from the editorial of a national newspaper:

... The extraordinary thing about the Archbishop's condemnation of the "pill" is that he needed to say it. . . . It is rather like making a statement that the Queen is not going to abdicate tomorrow and that the Prime Minister is not flying to the Moon. Yet it was evidently considered vital that Dr. John Heenan's statement was made without delay. The Catholic hierarchy of England and Wales saw a situation that was getting out of hand. . . .

The implications of this editorial are obvious. Indeed, the situation is out of hand and the reason is there for all to see—the apparent ambiguity of the many statements on the moral aspects of oral contraception.



CATHOLIC HOSPITALS AND MEDICAL EDUCATION . . .

What are the Catholic hospitals going to do about medical education? Are they going to sit dormant while those who have built upon a firm foundation supply the best medical care? Is your goal the best in medical care? If it is, one would expect your dedication to propel you inevitably to your goal. Surely those who preceded you at the Carney Hospital were undaunted under hardships which would make the road to superior medical education look like a stroll through a garden of flowers. Were these women and men so much more dedicated than you? I think not! But you—you must prove they were not.

—Frank M. Woolsey, Jr., M.D., Professor and Chairman, Department of Postgraduate Medicine, Albany Medical College. From an address given during the Centennial Observance of Carney Hospital, Boston, and printed in *Carney Hospital Journal*, 6:12-19 March 1964.